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U.S. hosts 'Earth Observation' summit

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WASHINGTON (AP) -- The United States kicked off an international conference Thursday aimed at learning more about the Earth and using the information to cope with weather and health problems.

"(The) potential for international collaboration in addressing these challenges is great, and the time to do it is now," Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham told officials, scientists and bankers from more than 30 nations who gathered at the State Department for the daylong conference.

Abraham, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Commerce Secretary Don Evans said they hope the session would encourage a strong partnership between science and government to meet critical challenges in disease and to protect the environment.

"Think of ... the lives that could be saved and the misery avoided if disaster managers in earthquake, flood or hurricane-prone regions could have many days or even weeks of advance warning," Powell said. "Or if we could better predict malarial outbreaks and other sources of infectious disease outbreaks that threatens the world being of citizens around the world."

Predicting disaster

In a statement, President George W. Bush said an integrated earth observation system will benefit people around the world, "particularly those in the Southern Hemisphere."

"Our cooperation will enable us to develop the capability to predict droughts, prepare for weather emergencies, plan and protect crops, manage coastal areas and fisheries, and monitor air quality," Bush said.

As a first step, Powell suggested creating an international system to make use of



Secretary of State Colin Powell speaks at the opening of Earth Observation Summit.

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“ We are all here because we share a deep interest in increasing human knowledge about our planet, and we want to act on that knowledge. ”

– Colin Powell, U.S. Secretary of State

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space-based measurements of the Earth. But Conrad C. Lauterbacher Jr., administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmosphere Administration, said one problem was the countries have different systems of collecting data.

Evans said development of an observation system for the planet could help scientists gain a more complete understanding of climate change and "the heartbeat of Mother Earth."

"There are still many unanswered questions about the ecosystem-based processes that define our world," Evans said. "A comprehensive Earth Observation System can bring some of these truths to light."

Speeding research

Last week, the Bush administration announced a 10-year, \$103 million plan to speed research in climate change, measure climatic effects from burning fossil fuel and industrial production of warming gases.

But environmentalists said the administration was focusing too much on natural causes and reopening scientific issues already studied thoroughly.

The \$103 million will be diverted from other programs, and no new spending has been announced to promote earth observation, either.

Spurning treaty

The Bush administration has been lukewarm to some international accords – spurning, for instance, a treaty to reduce global warming on grounds the economic consequences would be severe.

But Powell, who drew chuckles in saying the world of science was relieved he chose the military instead of a career in geology – he earned a bachelor of science degree in geology from City College in New York – said it is important for science and technology to reinforce the decisions of politicians and business executives.

"Developmental challenges are much too big for governments to tackle alone," Powell said.

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